



Women's Rights and America's Decline in Democracy Compared to European Countries

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Introduction

In June 1858, when Abraham Lincoln accepted the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate from Illinois, he famously declared, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." While Lincoln's words are often interpreted in the context of the nation's political divisions, they resonate deeply when applied to the issue of gender inequality and democracy. For me, gender inequality is inextricably tied to the broader struggle for women's rights—rights that are continually under threat, particularly in light of recent setbacks like the overruling of *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*.

Women's rights are inherently tied to the functioning of democracy. While the United States once prided itself on being a global leader in democratic ideals, it has increasingly fallen short in addressing the basic needs of women, particularly in terms of healthcare and representation. Though women are running for office at unprecedented rates, their presence in political leadership—at the local, state, and federal levels—remains inadequate. Women now hold 29% of seats in the U.S. Congress, a 50% increase from past decades, but this still lags behind many other nations.

Perhaps the most glaring issue is the state of healthcare for women. The U.S. ranks last among wealthy nations in maternal mortality, despite a global decrease of 43% in maternal deaths over the last three decades. According to the World Health Organization (One Health Trust), the U.S. ranks 55th in maternal mortality rates globally, and this crisis disproportionately impacts women of color. Furthermore, the U.S. remains the only developed nation without a national paid maternity leave policy, while countries like Germany offer comprehensive maternal healthcare and paid leave that continues to reduce maternal mortality.

The contrasting political landscape, it shows the erosion of women's reproductive rights in the U.S., particularly following the Supreme Court Decision of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overruled the constitutional right to abortion. States like Idaho and Missouri have passed extreme laws to limit abortion access, signaling a worrying trend that directly impacts both women's autonomy, women's health, and the health of democracy itself.

Thesis

Are women's rights directly tied to the fate of a democratic government?

Literature Review

The relationship between women's rights and democracy has been a subject of political philosophy for centuries. Thomas Hobbes, in *The Leviathan* (1651), was among the earliest to include women as participants in the social contract. Hobbes argued that all people, including women, are equal, as everyone is subject to domination and has the potential to dominate others. This early acknowledgment of women as equals, however, was not reflected in the institutions that followed.

The U.S. Constitution, written over a century after Hobbes' work, was designed to preserve a government that primarily served the interests of men. While it aimed to establish order and protect individual liberties, it excluded women from the very rights it sought to secure. The Constitution was crafted not to safeguard the rights of all citizens but to ensure the political and economic power of men. Women were not considered part of the body politic, and their rights were largely invisible in the legal framework of the early Republic.

This exclusion persisted well into the 19th and 20th centuries, despite the passage of key legislative milestones like the *Nineteenth Amendment* in 1920, which finally granted women the right to vote. Even as women's participation in the workforce and in society grew, particularly in

the post-World War II era, the fight for equality continued. By the 1950s, women's roles began to shift as they increasingly entered the workforce while still maintaining their roles as wives and mothers. This period marked a turning point where the status of women, in both public and private spheres, began to change, and with it, the democratic fabric of the nation strengthened.

However, the struggle for political, economic, and social equality for women is far from over. Today, as we see states like Missouri and Idaho passing extreme abortion bans and criminalizing those who help women seek reproductive healthcare, we face a backlash against the progress women have fought so hard to achieve. These efforts are part of a larger trend that threatens not only women's rights but also the very principles of democracy.

Research shows that countries that prioritize gender equality tend to have stronger democracies. For instance, nations with greater gender parity in government have more responsive political institutions, better standards of living, and improved healthcare outcomes. In countries like Germany, where women occupy significant political leadership positions, democracy has flourished.

Women's Political Representation and Democracy

The presence of women in political leadership is an important indicator of a healthy democracy. Globally, countries that achieve gender equality in government are more likely to have higher standards of living, more equitable healthcare, and better access to education. In the U.S., while women now occupy 29% of Congressional seats, there is still a long way to go before achieving true gender parity. Globally, women hold 22% of parliamentary seats, and 20% of European parliamentary speakers are women. However, leadership positions in political parties still tend to be dominated by men, with women holding just 10% of such positions worldwide.

Countries with higher levels of female political representation tend to show more responsiveness to the needs of their citizens. Studies have found that women politicians are often viewed as more honest and responsive than their male counterparts. This leads to higher public trust in government institutions. In the U.S., nearly 52% of citizens believe women make better political leaders than men, compared to only 13% who hold the opposite view. Similarly, in countries like Germany, where women hold 35% of the Bundestag, public confidence in democratic institutions is high.

Despite these gains, women remain underrepresented in the highest levels of government. For instance, while 29% of the U.S. Congress is made up of women, the country still lags behind nations like Sweden and Finland, where women hold more than 40% of legislative seats. Germany, with 35% female representation in its parliament, also continues to outperform the U.S. in terms of gender equality in politics. Even in countries like Russia, where gender inequality in politics is stark, women still hold fewer political positions than in more democratic nations.

The Backslide in Women's Rights and Democracy

As we witness a rise in authoritarian regimes and a global retreat from democratic norms, the erosion of women's rights often follows a similar trajectory. In countries like the U.S., the rollback of reproductive rights is a significant marker of democratic backsliding. The 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, which reversed *Roe v. Wade*, is a clear example of how authoritarian tendencies undermine the rights of women, while also threatening the health of democracy itself.

In the United States, in 2023, there are currently 321 women who hold positions in our Federal Government, including Vice President Kamala Harris, the first woman to hold the office

of the Vice President. There are 5,024 women in political positions in the State of California, including 12 women governors, the California State Senate, and the California State Assembly.

	TOTAL	ISO 3166-1 numeric country code					
		France	Germany	Mexico	Russia	Great Britain	United States
Agree strongly	5.9%	3.0%	1.2%	7.4%	20.7%	1.9%	3.5%
Agree	14.2%	8.6%	6.8%	16.5%	36.5%	6.7%	12.9%
Disagree	41.8%	29.3%	43.7%	46.4%	30.0%	45.2%	51.6%
Strongly disagree	35.7%	54.1%	45.9%	29.2%	8.5%	44.1%	31.5%
Don't know	2.1%	4.5%	2.1%	0.5%	4.1%	1.9%	0.1%
No answer	0.3%	0.5%	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.4%
Other missing; Multiple answers Mail (EVS)	0.0%	-	-	-	-	0.1%	-
(N)	(12,164)	(1,880)	(1,528)	(1,741)	(1,810)	(2,609)	(2,596)

In Germany, roughly 44% of citizens disagree with the notion that men make better political leaders, while nearly 46% strongly disagree. In the Bundestag (German Federal Government), 35.1% of parliament members are women, compared to just 29% of U.S. Congress members. In France, 29% of citizens disagree, and 54% strongly disagree; in Great Britain, 45% disagree, with 44% strongly disagreeing. In stark contrast, only 30% of Russians disagree that men are better political leaders, and just 8.5% strongly disagree. In Russia, women continue to face significant gender barriers in politics, with men still holding the majority of high-level jobs.

Many authoritarian leaders use the old strategy of undermining women's rights. While the advancement of women's rights has slowed down in recent years, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, violence against women has also increased, including violence against women in politics. This trend of de-democratization and backsliding is becoming increasingly evident in the U.S. and across Europe.

It seems that America is on a precarious path, trying to balance its democratic ideals while lawmakers impose conservative, and their personal religious views of women, their bodies, and their roles. The 118th U.S. Congress is composed of 75% non-Hispanic white males, a striking

reflection of the ongoing gender imbalance. We continue to see men—often from privileged backgrounds—dictating women’s rights, which fundamentally challenges the idea of freedom and equality.

Conclusion

The fate of women’s rights is undeniably tied to the fate of democracy. As we witness the erosion of women’s rights in the U.S., we also see a corresponding decline in democratic principles. The rollback of abortion rights, the Supreme Court now looking into the right of women to have access to contraceptive such as birth control, interracial marriage, the lack of paid maternity leave, and the underrepresentation of women in political office all point to a weakening of democracy in America.

To safeguard both women’s rights and democracy, it is essential that we continue the fight for gender equality—not as a separate issue, but as a central pillar of democratic governance. Women’s political participation is not only a matter of justice; it is a matter of democratic health. As we look toward the future, the survival of both women’s rights and democracy will depend on our collective ability to resist regressive policies and ensure that women have a seat at the table in shaping our society.

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